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Haiti: Furcy (April-June 1948)

Furcy is a mountain community strung out along the crest of a ridge, accessible at the time only on foot, horseback or jeep. There is no center, no market. A cluster of buildings consists of the police station, the school and the office of the agronomist. The Catholic church and presbytery constitute another such cluster ([PH421](#), [422](#)). Administratively, Furcy is part of the Commune of Kenscoff and belongs to the 3rd Section of Sourçailles. These divisions, as well as their names, reflect land ownership during colonial times. Furcy is also part of the Catholic parish of Kenscoff ([PH401](#), [402](#), [403](#), [404](#), [405](#)) and is served by its priest.

The road beyond the town of Kenscoff consists of a slightly improved old colonial trace, which is washed out periodically by heavy rains. A major storm in mid-June severely damaged the road, tore corrugated iron roofs off houses so that they became flying missiles, uprooted trees, and killed the peasants' goats. The house Erika rented became uninhabitable so that Erika's research period in this location was terminated somewhat prematurely.

The route to Furcy begins in Kenscoff where the motor road ends. Beyond that a steep mountain path leads to Le Refuge ([PH406](#), [PH418](#)) and from there to Furcy. At Le Refuge Mr. and Mrs. Kalmar, refugees from Austria, had established a small café and bed and breakfast in the late 1930s. Their daughter and Haitian son-in-law ran the Kalmar restaurant in the Champ de Mars in Port-au-Prince. The son-in-law brought visitors up to Le Refuge in his jeep.

In addition to several vacation homes built by urban people between Le Refuge and Furcy, there was also the permanent home and the gardens of Mr. and Mrs. Werner Jaegerhuber (1900-53) ([PH417](#)). A musician, ethnomusicologist and composer of German/Haitian extraction, Jaegerhuber was trained in Germany from his teenage years,

returning to Haiti when the Nazis came to power. His work has been revived and analyzed in recent years (e.g.: R. Grenier 2001, M. Largey 2004, 2006).

In this mountain area, people grow primarily corn and coffee on the severely deforested and eroded hillsides ([PH427](#), [428](#), [429](#), [430](#), [431](#), [432](#)). Corn exhausts the soil, the coffee trees are semi-wild. The only fuel available is charcoal, leading to further deforestation. Peasant huts and fields are dispersed over the mountainsides. Their earth walls and thatched roofs are barely visible from a distance ([PH440](#)).

For several generations well-to-do urban people have built simple summer houses in the area, which is cool, dry, and free of malaria. These are mainly located along the road. There is however no electricity, water, phone service, or mail delivery. Water has to be carried in from distant sources. The house rented by Erika for the period had an adjoining thatched cook-house, though most of the cooking was done in the yard on the traditional tripod with charcoal. There was an outhouse.

Peasants from whom the urban people have bought land have become caretakers for the new owners during their prolonged absences. In some instances, as part of a share-cropping relationship, they continue to work some fields, with owners deciding on crops and crop rotations. These city people become "patrons," perhaps employing one or more members of a family as long-term servants in the city, acting as intermediaries in finding employment, dealing with authorities, etc. For the children of these peasants this often leads eventually to migration to the city and alienation from the land. This may be due to the indebtedness of families and also to laws of partible inheritance. In this system all heirs have equal rights to the property, so that sizes of holding become smaller and smaller over time. Also, all heirs must agree on divisions and sales of land. As a result of migrations and loss of contact, agreements become difficult to arrange and turn into protracted processes.

Some agricultural work, particularly hoeing, may be done by a cooperative work party, a *kombit*. Men work in a line, accompanied by a drummer who sets the pace. The work is

followed by a meal. Participation is based on mutual exchange of labor. This is an ancient practice with African roots. However, by 1948, this practice was becoming rare. On occasion some men worked as hired laborers.

“Friday and Tuesday are market days in Kenscoff. Friday afternoon there was a constant stream of people going up and down the mountainside. They were mostly women but also some men, who were going to and from Kenscoff and also Port-au-Prince. The women and even some little girls—ten or younger—carried immense loads on their heads and never even seemed to stop. The same crowds on Saturday. They go down one day with the produce of their gardens, those of their husbands and also produce they buy. These they sell in the market. With the money earned they buy goods to resell in the mountains. Saturday night, after dark, a long column of women came back, carrying pine torches. They were going over to the other side of the hills, all the way to Jacmel on the south coast” (From field notes).

Furcy has a police station (*gendarmerie*), which has the only telephone in the area, a country school--at the time in existence for five years—and a Protestant as well as a Catholic church. There is an agronomist, who has attempted to introduce some newer agricultural methods: terracing, the use of fertilizer, and new crops (primarily potatoes), and agricultural co-ops. All of these have met with resistance, mistrust and only limited success.

The school made attempts at some teaching of agricultural practices by establishing a garden. Parents objected to this, preferring their children to do their gardening for the benefit of their families rather than, as they perceived it, for the benefit of the teachers. Instruction was mostly in French, although some explanations had to be given in Creole. Creole was not recognized as a formal language and there was no officially accepted orthography. However, the McConnell-Laubach system of phonetic spelling had been established and a strong literacy campaign was being waged. This was largely connected to protestant missionizing. Methodist Bishop McConnell and his family were in fact

building a house in Furcy during this time period, on a hill at the end of the road, extending the road themselves.

There is a mayor--a Port-au-Prince lawyer--who owns a house in Furcy, but travels to Furcy rarely. A local man is "chef-de-section," (also referred to as "commandant" or rural police), who also performs some church functions.

Religion

The Catholic priest comes up from Kenscoff from time to time and leads an annual Catholic "mission." On these occasions he baptizes children, performs marriages. Some years earlier (1939-41), the Catholic Church conducted a very active national "anti-superstition campaign" (For as the discussion of this campaign see A. Métraux 1959:338-41). As a result, there is no overt practice of *vodou*, but one neighborhood man is known to have been an *oungan* (*vodou* priest) and he still practices covertly, e.g., conducting a private service for ancestors of a local family, baptizing drums, etc.

Catholic Church

The church of Furcy is part of the parish of Kenscoff. When no priest is available, the sacristan performs a service, but there is no Mass. The church is a simple structure of red corrugated iron ([PH421](#)). Crowds of worshippers gather after a Sunday service in their Sunday best ([PH422](#), [423](#)). Note that men wear urban attire, women wear white cotton or denim dresses and typical head scarves.

There is a Protestant church at some distance and also a small church of the Church of God, an evangelical group, started by American missionaries. Perhaps in response to these efforts, the Catholic practices included testimonial services as well as a gathering at which a tree was burnt, while the cheering crowd called on St. Michael to fight Satan. Conversion to Protestantism has created rifts in some families. The impression was gained that a suppression of *vodou* was related to an increase in alcoholism, although no firm figures could be obtained.